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Pakistan Is Steadfast Against Terror

By Asif Ali Zardari

Last week's trilateral meeting in Washington between U.S. leaders and the foreign ministers, military and intelligence leaders of my country and Afghanistan was a crucial step forward in the war on terrorism and fanaticism in South and Central Asia. For the first time, Pakistan, the U.S. and Afghanistan agreed on a coherent military and political strategy to isolate and deal with those intent on destabilizing our region and terrorizing the world.

By reaching agreement, we have overcome the past legacy of distrust that has characterized Pakistani-Afghan relations for decades and has complicated strategic planning and common goals. Monday's terrorist attack against the Sri Lankan cricket team in Lahore shows once again the evil we are confronting.

We aren't appeasing
the Taliban or
terrorists in Swat.

But if Pakistan, Afghanistan and the U.S. are to prevail in the ongoing battle against terrorism, straight talk is essential. And this straight talk begins with a fact: Pakistan's fight against terrorism is relentless. Since the election of a democratic government last year, we have successfully conducted military operations in our Federally Administered Tribal Areas and other parts of the country, capturing or killing high officials of al Qaeda and the Taliban, as well as hundreds of their fighters. In the highly volatile Swat Valley, our strategy has been to enter into talks with traditional local clerics to help restore peace to the area, and return the writ of the state.

We have not and will not negotiate with extremist Taliban and terrorists. The clerics with whom we have engaged are not Taliban. Indeed, in our dialogue we'd made it clear that it is their responsibility to rein in and neutralize Taliban and other insurgents. If they do so and lay down their arms, this initiative will have succeeded for the people of Swat Valley. If not, our security forces will act accordingly. Unfortunately, this process of weaning reconcilable elements of an insurgency away

from the irreconcilables has been mischaracterized in the West.

Moreover, we have not and will not condone the closing of girls' schools, as we saw last year when militants closed schools in pockets of Swat Valley. Indeed, the government insists that the education of young women is mandatory. This is not an example of the government condoning or capitulating to extremism—quite the opposite.

Our transitional Pakistani democracy is still restructuring after decades of episodic dictatorship. One of the most critical institutions that needs to be resurrected is an independent judiciary. Recent decisions of the Pakistani Supreme Court have been criticized by many in my country, and indeed by some in my political party. In particular, my government had taken legal steps to overturn a lower-court decision that would not allow former Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif and his brother to serve in public office. The Supreme Court, however, chose to uphold the lower court decision. This is the nature of an independent judiciary, and this is the process of rule of law.

An overwhelming majority (57 out of 63) of superior court judges dismissed under the previous government's emergency rule has returned to the court. The judiciary of Pakistan has been restored, and is independent. In a mature polity, when one loses in court, one respects the decision of the court and moves on, seeking other constitutional remedies. It is not the nature of democracy to appeal court decisions to the streets. This is part of the culture of cynicism and negativity that for too long has permeated Pakistani politics.

When the U.S. Supreme Court decided the presidency in *Bush v. Gore*, Vice President Al Gore did not call for his millions of supporters to take to the streets to try to overturn by force the ruling of the court. He and the Democratic Party accepted the Supreme Court's decision and moved on. The Democrats later regained the Congress and now the presidency. That is the mark of a successful democracy. The recent agitation in the province of Punjab (supposedly in favor of Mr. Sharif) is an attempt to destabilize our democracy and a major distraction from Pakistan's critical problems, which include reviving our economy and fighting violent extremism.

I have long fought for democracy in

my country. Thousands in my party and other parties have died through the years fighting against dictatorship and tyranny. The greatest champion of democracy in my country, my wife Moina Benazir Bhutto, gave her life fighting for the values of liberty. This is an existential battle. If we lose, so too will the world. Failure is not an option.

Mr. Zardari is president of Pakistan.